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When Theatre Meets Fandom: Audience Reviews of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*

Abstract:

The 2016 launch of the stage production *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* presented fans with their final opportunity - the first in nearly a decade - to reunite with the characters of their beloved series. Running in London's West End since summer 2016 and due to transfer to Broadway in 2018, *Cursed Child* presents an unusual case-study of what happens when an author working in other media chooses to revive their own storyworld *only* onstage. This makes it the ideal focus point to explore what happens when theatre and fandom collide. The play script was also published in book format, and quickly became the fastest-selling theatre script since records began. But what did audiences themselves make of this dual rebirth? This article explores how the live performance and the playtext were received by fans as very different forms of afterlife. This has prompted important questions about access. Presented with an extension to their beloved storyworld after so many years, what happens when Harry Potter fans found themselves unable to actually take part in this new theatrical experience? And to what extent was the publication of the script a fair compromise in return for audiences' undying loyalty? This question has taken me on a journey from the specific example of *Cursed Child* to a more general exploration of fan-led efforts to democratise access to exclusive live events.

Keywords: theatre

audience research
liveness
Harry Potter
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democracy

Biography:

A theatre lecturer and researcher at the University of Bristol, Kirsty Sedgman asks how different people make sense of live performance events. Her work explores the interplay between audiences, cultural value, fandom, community, and place. Her book *Locating the Audience* (published by Intellect in 2016) was the first to explore how people developed relationships with a cultural institution at the time of its formation: the then brand-new National Theatre Wales. She is currently working on a three-year British Academy postdoctoral research fellowship investigating audience engagements with regional theatre through time. Find her at www.kirstysedgman.com, or on Twitter at @KirstySedgman.

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When Theatre Meets Fandom: Audience Reviews of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*

Friday 26 June 2015 was an exciting day for Harry Potter fans. Eighteen years after the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the first in her seven-book series, JK Rowling took to Twitter to announce an eighth addition to the Potter canon: *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. Finally, the world's most lucrative fictional universe was coming back to life.

Except that Harry Potter's sudden return has not in practice been quite as neat as this suggests. First, *Cursed Child* is not the only afterlife that Rowling has granted her wizarding world. On the global digital publisher Pottermore Rowling has periodically released short excerpts of her unpublished writing, with the traditional publication of spin-off books such as *Quidditch Through the Ages* and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* having further augmented her universe. In this vein, at the same time as the development of *Cursed Child* Rowling was also working on *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, a 2016 film about a wizard in 1920s New York. Second, whereas Rowling was sole author of all seven Harry Potter books, this time she was working as part of a partnership, developing the story in collaboration with two other creatives: Jack Thorne and John Tiffany. Third, and most significantly, while those seven stories were initially disseminated as novels, with the franchise becoming a publishing phenomenon on a previously unheard-of scale, *Cursed Child* was written as a stage play, launching at the Palace Theatre in London in summer 2016.

The play begins as the final book left off: with the primary characters waiting at the station to send their own children off to Hogwarts. In an effort to minimise spoilers, suffice it to say that the plot revolves around the evolving relationship between Albus Potter, second son of the books' eponymous protagonist, and Scorpius Malfoy, whose father Draco was Harry's childhood nemesis. Both boys can be seen throughout the two parts of the play struggling to navigate their identities around their fathers' respective fame: Harry for defeating Lord Voldemort and becoming the saviour of the wizarding world; Draco for his collusion in its near-destruction. When Albus and Scorpius are unexpectedly thrown together, their friendship nearly undoes the trials-and-triumph timeline that readers so avidly followed all those years ago.

But of course in June 2015 none of this detail was known. All fans had to go on was a series of tweets by Rowling herself, explaining simply that a new play was launching in London the following year, that it would be called *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, that it would tell a new story - and that it would not be a prequel. Addressing the question of why the story would not be novelised, Rowling simply expressed confidence that, having seen the play, audiences would agree that this was 'the only proper medium for the story' (quoted McGeorge 2015: np). If she were going to extend Harry Potter's tale for one last hurrah, only theatre would do.¹ For this reason, I have chosen in this article to refer to *Cursed Child* as a 'rebirth' of the Harry Potter world rather than, say, a 'resurrection', in order to acknowledge audiences' acute attention to how the characters' much-awaited return has happened through an entirely different kind of medium. As a live performance rather than a recorded or written text, and coming almost a decade after the publication of the final book (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, released on 21 June 2007), *Cursed Child* was to be fans' final opportunity to reunite with the characters of their beloved series. The 'liveness' of the experience therefore became critically significant in reception terms. Of course, any study of theatrical audience experience must consider the effects of ephemerality and performer-audience co-presence:² but as this article hopes to show, when a text of such international popularity is turned into theatre, a whole new dimension to the liveness debate is unveiled. This is because via *Cursed Child*, to date, only a select handful from the many millions of fans around the world have been able once again to wait on Platform 9¾ at Kings Cross for the Hogwarts Express; to take part in a long-awaited reunion with Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Draco Malfoy, and others besides; to see the changes wrought by time on their beloved characters, and to find out where the story has taken them after that final full stop.

Potter's rebirth is therefore a unique form of transition. Although countless beloved books - from *Mary Poppins* to *Matilda* to *Of Mice and Men* - have been adapted for the stage, and despite a strong history of using theatre as a space for extending stories (see e.g. *Wicked's* prefiguration of *Wizard of Oz*), the *Cursed Child* play was the first prominent instance in which an author has chosen to revive their own massively popular storyworld

¹ Rowling was also adamant that *Cursed Child* should be a dramatic play as opposed to a musical (Crompton 2016).

² The idea of liveness has been much theorised in performance studies, from Phelan's (1993) and Auslander's (1999) foundational interventions onwards.

only onstage. Through studying *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, this article is therefore able to ask what happens when a textual canon with a massive international following is transplanted into the West End. What have audiences themselves made of this transition? And what happens when theatre and fandom intersect?

The Erasure of Fandom from Theatre

It is a truth widely acknowledged that the rich seam of fan studies has rarely extended into the region of theatre. While performance studies has seen increasing interest in understanding audience experience (Reason et al 2015), there has still been remarkably little scholarly attention paid to those theatregoers who self-define as fans. As a consequence, we know very little about what happens variously when audiences see themselves as fans of theatre itself, when audiences become fans of a particular show, or when audiences are drawn into theatres via external fan engagement. Regarding any of these scenarios, and as this section goes on to detail, only a handful of academics have been interested in exploring the nexus between theatre and fandom.

What makes this gap even more startling is the strong historical trajectory of theatre fan activity. Possibly the best overview of this history is provided by Caroline Heim, who situates the emergence of theatre fan communities at around 1810: 'a time when the "star system" was gaining traction in the United States' (2016: 42). In fact, in *Textual Poachers* (1992) Henry Jenkins explains that one of the earliest uses of 'fan' was to refer to female theatregoers, the so-called 'Matinee Girls', 'who male critics claimed had come to admire the actors rather than the plays' (2012: 12). But the roots of theatrical fandom stretch back even further than this, as Heim so valuably explains. Her article proceeds to track the evolution of fandom from nineteenth-century Bowery B'hoys to the twentieth-century Matinee Girls into the twenty-first century army of 'large, fiercely loyal Broadway theatre fan communities', who, like their counterparts before them, continue to forge communities around favourite texts through strategies of appropriation and re-imagination (2016: 48). By purchasing merchandise, learning songs, and collecting multiple viewings, fans are able to

perform allegiance to their favourite shows and actors and to construct a sense of collective identity. These practices have been afforded by new technological advances that enable fans to narrate and translate texts in fresh ways, and that also work to blur the line between performer and audience. While the type of fan who attends a stage production due to a non-theatrical investment (most commonly a commitment to a starring actor) is more likely to be a one-off attendee, Heim suggests, it is those whose commitment is to theatre itself that tend to be repeat audiences:

Many of these communities are institutionalised by names that signify their identification with the production they follow: Phans (Phantom of the Opera), Hedheads (Hedwig and the Angry Inch), Fansies (Newsies), ROA-holics (Rock of Ages), Q-Tips (Avenue Q), Jeckies and Twickies (Jekyll and Hyde), Hamilfans (Hamilton) and Rent Heads (Rent).'

(ibid)

Added to this, we have the theatrical nomads: those whose commitment is to Broadway more broadly, who see multiple shows on multiple occasions, and who will often travel across the world to collect new viewings (ibid: 49). The latest demographics from the USA's Broadway League signal the significance of these committed audiences to the New York theatre ecology. While 'devoted fans' (i.e. those who attended fifteen or more performances) constituted only 5.5% of the audience in 2015/16, they accounted for over a third of all Broadway ticket sales (Broadway League 2016).³

So how can we understand the erasure of fandom from theatre studies? Firstly, it is no secret that fans themselves have been a source of concern and ridicule for decades - even centuries. *The Journal of Fandom Studies* is one important vehicle by which fan scholars have worked to legitimise fandom as an important subject for study⁴; yet still this research tradition has encountered difficulties flowing into the cultural studies mainstream. Secondly, it is largely agreed that both audience research and fan studies have historically taken place 'on sites of struggle, where audiences were considered in some way to be *at risk*', and thereby have tended to focus mainly on mass media forms of consumption rather than on audiences' less-worrisome engagements with 'high' art (Sedgman 2016a: xii). And thirdly,

³ No comparable data pertaining to heavily-committed fan activity is available for the UK's West End.

⁴ See e.g. Francesca Coppa's article 'Fuck Yeah, Fandom is Beautiful' (2014) for a robust analysis of the various waves of fan studies.

when applied to theatre, the very concept of ‘fandom’ itself takes on a particular slipperiness. This last point requires some unpacking.

In *Popular Theatre and Political Culture*, Tim Prentki and Jan Selman identify an overarching resistance to theatrical popularism, tracing an operational tension between ‘art, literally with a capital “A”, and commercial art products created for the mass market of the proletariat by unscrupulous capitalists’ (2000: 59). The productions that tend to capture the most intense fan attention, attracting commitment by audiences who unreservedly self-identify as ‘fans’, tend to be those transnational entities that Dan Rebellato terms ‘pleasure machines: vast theatrical mechanisms to generate rapture, exhilaration and joy’ (2011: np). This places the fan at the centre of a set of problematic assumptions, whereby it is supposed that the spectacularisation of theatrical productions means there ‘is something not to be trusted about the kinds of enjoyments they produce’ (Sedgman 2016b: 41). These ‘manufactured pleasures’ (ibid) are thereby charged with complaints of inauthenticity, seen to feed into an experience economy that privileges easy enjoyment over aesthetic and/or political engagement.

In other words, people who call themselves fans within theatre contexts are often criticised precisely *for being fans*, because their fandom tends (more often than not) to get attached to the ‘wrong’ kind of theatre.⁵ Equally, Daisy Abbott (2015) identifies a queasiness within serious theatre criticism at the risk that casting media stars within theatrical roles will attract non-theatre-going audiences who are ill-equipped to handle the responsibility of spectatorship. Speaking of Tom Hiddleston in the Donmar’s 2013 production of *Coriolanus*, Abbott suggests that while the influx of Hiddleston fans into theatre demonstrates a ‘clear demand for cultural consumption of this actor in this role’ (2015: 1), the resultant debates frequently mobilised criticisms of fan behaviour for breaching etiquette. This position was further reflected in the furious arguments that followed the publication in *The Stage* of an article by Richard Jordan (2016), asking if *Game of Thrones* fans who attended a production of *Dr. Faustus* in order to see star Kit Harington in the leading role constituted ‘the worst West End audience ever?’, as well as in the rabid media attention surrounding Cumberbitches’ perceived misbehaviour at Benedict Cumberbatch’s *Hamlet* (Bradley 2015).

⁵ To be clear, this is not my position. In fact, it is a position which I have actively worked to refute. For example, see my article ‘What’s Bigger than a Standing Ovation?’ (Sedgman, 2016b) for an explanation of the challenge that audience scholars are making to the idea of ‘authenticity’ in theatre.

This is not the place to deeply analyse the war that is right now raging between people campaigning for the maintenance of theatrical etiquette and those who prioritise widening audience participation. Rather, my intention here is to unveil both a widespread mistrust of theatre-based fan *activity*, and a connected - and collective - distaste of fan-engaged theatrical *texts*. However, this is still only part of the story. It is my assertion that while those with advanced involvements in theatre (such as critics, academics, and makers) exhibit engagements that are as heartfelt, passionate, consuming, and committed as those of any fan, they often resist mobilising the fundamental tenets of fandom in making sense of their involvement. This position finds echoes in the work of David Román, who proposes a shared sense within theatre studies that overt fandom

undermines our scholarly project and reveals an uncritical love for theatre. The fear that our love of theatre will call into question our critical capacities follows from our field's efforts to credentialize itself against the charge of inconsequentiality. To indulge in our feelings of pleasure and more to the point, to write about them, is viewed as unprofessional, a form of fandom that should be relegated to the publicists or left to our private theatre journals.

(2002: ix)

Román criticises the discipline for demanding we keep 'our love of theatre outside of our scholarship' (ibid). While there is evidence to suggest that the division between ardent and critical modes of response is actually not so easily made,⁶ it is fair to say that theatre academia has largely resisted either directly studying fan communities, or analysing spectatorial engagement via fan studies frameworks.⁷ Seth Soulstein has directly called for a blurring of this line between fandom and other forms of highly-invested audiencing. While professionally-implicated theatregoers might prefer to consider themselves a 'connoisseur' or 'aficionado' of live performance, he argues, their 'consumptive dispositions, and

⁶ In fact, there is a sense that the majority of theatre scholarship is driven by an overarching personal love of - and belief in - the power of live performance. While it doesn't talk about fandom specifically, I have always found Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance* (2010) to be a particularly powerful (and impressively overt) explication of this passion for the subject.

⁷ There are of course a number of exceptions, some of which are cited in this article. For other valuable sources see e.g. Wolf (2007), MacDonald and Halman (2014), Biggin (2017).

expression of those tastes, fit along a spectrum of what can be considered fan behaviour’ (2012: 1). In other words: ‘You are a fan’ (ibid).⁸

It is therefore time to pay attention to those instances where theatre and fandom meet. And where better to start than the moment when a massive franchise, trailing behind it an international fan network, suddenly crashed into the West End? In this regard, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* has been arguably the most significant theatrical event of this millennium so far.

“It’s Okay, But It’s Not My Harry Potter”: Reviewing Audience Reviews

There is no better way to get quickly familiar with the legend of JK Rowling and her wizarding storyworld than to read Stephen Brown’s summary, ‘Harry Potter and the Fandom Menace’ (2007). Because Rowling’s creation, Brown reminds us, is a legend inside a legend: a classic tale of good-versus-evil wrapped up in an inspirational rags-to-riches story. Single motherhood, writing in cafes to save on electricity; the inspirational train journey from Edinburgh to Kings Cross; rejection after rejection; finally, the publisher who took a chance because his daughter begged him to, then slow-burn interest leading to skyrocketing sales figures. A movie deal. Theme park attractions. Enough branded merchandise to deck out a real-life castle. The narrative that led JK Rowling to Harry Potter is almost as compelling as the story itself.

Except not really. Distributed in more than 200 territories in 68 languages and selling over 450 million copies worldwide, the Harry Potter franchise sparked unprecedented fervour in the publishing world (Thomas et al 2005). By the time of the launch of the final book (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*) Potter fever had reached its peak, with eleven million copies selling in the first 48 hours (*New York Times* 2007). Nine years later *Cursed Child* sold 850,000 copies in the same timeframe, making it the biggest-selling edition of a

⁸ Francesca Coppa takes the link between theatre and fandom a step further, arguing persuasively that fandom itself is inherently performative: because ‘in theatre, stories are retold all the time. Theatre artists think it’s fine to tell to tell [sic] the same story again, but differently’ (236).

playscript since records began in 1998 (Hutchison 2016). Meanwhile, the play itself has been constantly sold out since the box office opened, with the first batch of 175,000 priority seats disappearing inside eight hours. That is a rate of just over six tickets per second.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the *Cursed Child* phenomenon is the contrast in reception between those who have been able to watch the play live, and those who only responded to the script. Reading through the respective reviews, it seems inconceivable that audiences can possibly be talking about the same story. While reviewers who saw the stage-play tended to be extremely positive about the experience, people who only read the script were much more likely to write - often at great length - about their disappointment. This section uses reception research approaches to examine the difference between reviews left on online forums like TripAdvisor to the performance event itself, and those that were submitted to Amazon and Goodreads after having read the book. In doing so I was interested in exploring how the live performance and the playtext were received by fans as very different forms of afterlife. One of the significant outcomes of studying the nexus between theatre and fandom has been the question it provokes about *access*. Presented with an extension to their beloved storyworld after so many years, what happens when Harry Potter fans found themselves unable to actually take part in this new theatrical experience? And to what extent was the publication of the script a fair compromise in return for audiences' undying loyalty? This question has taken me on a journey from the specific example of *Cursed Child* to a more general exploration of fan-led efforts to democratise access to exclusive live events.

In total, the live event attracted 261 TripAdvisor reviews to date.⁹ Meanwhile, the script has yielded a massive 309,781 Amazon and Goodreads reviews. In order to investigate reactions to the live event more deeply, I have therefore also needed to look at the discussions that have evolved online via sites such as TheatreBoard.co.uk, BroadwayWorld.com, and Tumblr. However, whilst these discussions contain significant qualitative information, the process of studying TripAdvisor, Goodreads, and Amazon in detail has enabled me to draw out some quantitative data as well. This is because all three sites ask contributors to rate products on a 5-point star rating, which allowed me to capture a sense, admittedly partial and incomplete, of the levels of positivity provoked by each

⁹ This is obviously too small a sample to draw out any firm generalisations. In addition to the other sources cited below, the reader may therefore also want to see the results of a cursory Reddit questionnaire conducted by user dommitor (imgur.com/gallery/Duawa).

medium. Of course, reception research into online responses brings with it a number of considerations. Firstly, it is important to note that these self-selecting responses do not necessarily reflect the ‘quiet majority’ who have not left a review [Sedgman 2016b: 43]. Secondly, it is necessary to consider the ethical implications of quoting online posts. This chapter employs the ‘moderate disguise’ approach (Bruckman 2002), with online comments included with their associated usernames and yet without links to the posts themselves. This is because of the context in which these responses were posted: as reviewers, I believe that their experiences and reactions deserve to be taken as seriously as those written by newspaper reviewers and theatre bloggers, and yet I am cognoscent of the risk that commentators might not wish their profiles to be scrutinised in this context. I have also kept all quotations in the format they appear online without ‘cleaning up’ any spelling or grammatical anomalies. This is to avoid assuming that as a researcher I know best what others are trying to say.¹⁰

Taking into account the TripAdvisor reviews on the Attraction listing for the Cursed Child show specifically, as well as those directed at the Palace Theatre more generally but which made reference to Harry Potter, responses to the stage performance were overwhelmingly positive: over 85% gave the performance five stars. However, if we exclude those reviews left on the Palace Theatre listing, the five-star rating shoots up to 92%.

Fig. 1: TripAdvisor review ratings for Attraction and Venue listings

Why separate these reviews? Because responses to the Palace listing often focused on analysing the building and its facilities rather than the play itself. For example, Niki W complained that ‘[w]e were on row f of the balcony and as you can see from the pics attached.. it's the worst view you could get. [...] Shame as from the tiny bits of the show I could see... [it] was brilliant’. Similarly, looetay said that they were made ‘to feel like second rate citizens’, with a ‘truly incredible play’ having been ‘utterly spoiled by the terrible seats and conditions in the balcony’. From the ‘vertigo-inducing height’ to the unbearable heat (and its associated smells) to the cramped leg conditions, ‘I have never felt so hot and so ill during a performance’. While this vehemence was not confined to Palace Theatre reviews,

¹⁰ See e.g. Bore 2011, Williams 2011, Boyle 2014 for more on the ethical and practical considerations of using digital material posted in the public domain.

those critiquing the Attraction listing were seemingly more likely to moderate their negativity with the awareness that the 'proper' subject for their analysis was the show itself, despite occasional difficulty separating the two. Take for instance Kai111, who concluded a description of 'excruciating' knee pain with the proviso that 'I do try to remove it from my memory of the play so as not to ruin the experience for me. But seriously it was INHUMANE. [...] And that's why I did not give this a 5. Because of the seats.'

In her book *The Discourse of Online Consumer Reviews*, Camilla Vasquez draws attention to the propensity of reviewers to make reference to the star ratings they assign. Many such references serve to justify reviewers' decisions, and '[i]n doing so show that they are able to discern, discriminate and be fair' (2014: 54). Vasquez's work presents a valuable reminder of the necessity to consider discourse in context: '[w]hether reviews are primarily positive or negative, evaluation is clearly their primary function' (ibid: 2). Furthermore, Maria Barrett's analysis of reviews of Liverpool's Royal Court Theatre suggests that TripAdvisor affords users the ability to 'relate their reflections in their own vernacular, to an audience that may be imagined to be much like themselves. Consequently, [...] the language tends to be open and helpful, intending to encourage, guide, or warn others' (2016: 58). In the case of *Cursed Child*, a number of reviewers specifically advised their readers to familiarise themselves with the Harry Potter canon before attending the play:

Being a big Potter fan, I was destined to love this and can imagine that if you've not seen or know much about Harry Potter (or even that you don't like it?!) this play probably isn't for you! There's a lot of references to the books and films throughout so a basic knowledge is necessary. Particularly as everyone is expected to know Ron, Hermione and Harry - there's no real intro to their characters! So wouldn't call this a stand alone piece. [Lydia J]

For diehard Potter-Fans it's obviously a must-see and everybody even remotely fascinated by the Potter Universe will enjoy this performance. However, to follow the storyline one should be familiar with the original works. It will otherwise be difficult to understand the fast moving plot as the play rarely makes an effort to explain neither setting nor characters or fictional historic references. Potter-Initiates should therefore read the novels first before watching this amazing show. [Tirell]

Only a handful of reviewers talked about booking tickets despite not being a Potter-lover beforehand. For example, John S comments that 'I'm not a huge Harry Potter fan, never read

the books but have seen most of the movies. But I knew this play was a hot ticket and would be a great experience'. John S was in the minority here: it was far more common to find fans reviewing the play specifically in order to recommend it to other fans. A couple of people did so via oblique reference to canonical Potterisms, indicating a desire to share the experience with a wizarding folk community (Lacoss 2002: 70):

I booked these tickets well over a year out and I'm glad I had divination..I mean, devined how wonderful this play would be! The Theater was charming and the 5£ program told a little bit of history about The Palace Theater as well as a handy guide to fantastic cast members and where to find them (in other productions and television appearances)! Empty your vaults and drop every last galleon, sickle, and knut to go see this enchanting production. If you're a Potter fan like me, you won't be disappointed. [...] I bid you good luck in the final task (of obtaining tickets...that is)! Mischief Managed!
[Suzanne A]

In fact reviewer DJost went a step further, suggesting that non-fans reading this review should save their money and '[I]eave the tickets available for those who will truly appreciate them'. In a BroadwayWorld.com thread following the news that *Cursed Child* would be transferring to Broadway, LesWickedly commented that as a 'huge Harry Potter fan' there was a very real fear about 'the madness that will ensure' once tickets go on sale. A further TheatreBoard.co.uk thread about ticketing rules prompted discussion about the poor etiquette of ticket-holders for sniggering at fans queuing outside in the rain for returns, along with general praise of 'heroic' Palace staff for 'patiently dealing with a neverending stream of the disgruntled and disappointed' [Honoured Guest]. What all this highlights is a key issue concerning the intersection between fandom and live performance. Whereas the Potter fanbase is massive and far-flung, the potential audience for theatre is always-already limited by the form itself. Even those performance events that Dan Rebellato terms McTheatre (2011), packaged and sold around the globe, will only ever be accessed by a fraction of the people who may wish to see them. Take for example the world's longest-running theatrical production, the West End adaptation of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, which has been going since 1952. In 2011, the show's producer Sir Stephen Waley-Cohen commented ruefully that even with 'very good houses for the last 59 years' only about 10 million audience members had seen the play in London: 'about the number for one episode of a good soap or Downton Abbey' (Masters 2011: np). Granted, for its first sixty years *The*

Mousetrap was a static show, playing only at the St Martins Theatre in London before embarking on a UK tour in 2012. In that case, what if we turn instead to the most widely-watched theatre production? Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* started life in 1989 in the West End, holds the record of being the longest-running show on Broadway (third in the world), and thanks to its series of parallel productions has been seen by over 140 million people in 166 cities in 35 countries around the globe (Phantom of the Opera 2017). This, I remind you, is over 27 years; although doubtless impressive, it is still only an international average of around five million people a year. Meanwhile, box office data suggests that the final film instalment in the Potter series - *Deathly Hallows Part 2* - was seen by over eleven million people worldwide on its opening *weekend* (Rosenberg 2011).

While it is impossible to pinpoint precisely how many people have experienced the franchise over its lifetime, a 2011 YouGov poll estimates that *a quarter of all Americans* had seen all eight of the films, and two-thirds had seen at least one (Sunderland et al 2016: 161). So even when *Cursed Child* makes its Broadway transfer in 2018, and even if it spawns a clutch of parallel productions that immediately begin touring to other cities and countries, there will still be a fundamental disconnect between fans' collective desire to see this next instalment and their ability to access it. In fact, Peter Bradshaw commented disgustedly that the inflated ticket touting that followed the *Cursed Child* launch 'proves what I have always suspected: that theatre is a horrendous apartheid world that discriminates in favour of the smug rich, and cinema is a socialist utopia where everyone is welcome equally' (2016).

This article does not intend to hammer yet another nail into the debates around theatre's value compared to so-called 'mass media' forms. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that its ephemerality is, of course, at the very heart of theatre's power. For those who manage to get hold of tickets, this sense of exclusivity is undoubtedly also a major reason for pleasure: once a week, the *Cursed Child*'s official Twitter account becomes swamped by the hashtag #FridayForty, as the lucky recipients of forty newly-released tickets celebrate their success. However, in some respects this seems to undercut an important aspect of the Potter phenomenon: its simultaneity. In queuing for the books, dressing up in costume with friends, or simply settling down to read at the same time as everybody else, there was a sense that with each new release Potter-lovers were at the heart of a global live event. With the stage play only a comparatively tiny audience is able to share in the experience at a time. Furthermore, in handing out badges exhorting audiences to 'Keep the

Secrets’, along with the constant exposure of #KeeptheSecrets on Twitter, Rowling and her team reinforced that sense of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’; those who share in the secrets versus those who do not.¹¹

The insider/outsider dichotomy as provoked by the live experience is naturally not unique to *Cursed Child*: every live event creates distinctions to some extent between those who were there and those who were not. It is therefore interesting here to consider the long history of fan resistance to ephemeral distinctiveness: namely, the idea that momentous moments should be preserved for (and by) those lucky few who witnessed their occurrence. A good example of this is fan bootlegging (the practice of making amateur audio samples at theatre shows or music concerts), which is a phenomenon with a history as long as that of recording technologies themselves. For instance, in his analysis of piracy in the music industry Joshua Walmsley-Lycett (2014) captures the power of bootleg recordings to situate the fan at moments of infamy. Walmsley-Lycett evocatively quotes the notorious music pirate John Bootlegger-Smith on the significance of a rare recording of Bob Dylan, captured live on 17 May 1966 at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. This was during what Colin Fleming describes as Dylan’s ‘lightning-rod phase’, when he was ‘seen as a turncoat by the folkie community aghast that he dared to rock out with an electric guitar’ (2016: np). After Dylan had begun with his usual acoustic set, Bootlegger-Smith relates, ‘out came the electric instruments and the band’. This prompted an audience member incensed at Dylan’s ‘selling out’ to shout ‘Judas!’, to which Dylan replied, ‘I don’t believe you. You’re a liar’. And ‘this became folk law’, Bootlegger-Smith concludes, ‘this exchange in this particular concert, this was the tape’ (Walmsley-Lycett 2014: 11).

Within music as in theatre, collecting and trading bootlegs swiftly became a way of affording fans to feel part of the live experience (Cummings 2013). More recently, Lucy Bennett (2013) has shown how contemporary fan practices such as live-tweeting set-lists at a concert are often driven by a sense of duty: a need to pay back the many people who have performed similar tasks previously, allowing a wider fanbase to listen along to the songs in order at the same time. At the heart of all this has always been an inherent sense of *fairness*. While the desire to open exclusive experiences up for everyone must be balanced with the need ‘not to inflict unfair competition on the record companies’ (Cummings 2013: 75), Lee

¹¹ The long wait and final triumph brought its own pleasures, of course, as a number of *Cursed Child* reviewers noted.

Marshall offers evidence to suggest that bootlegging (unlike piracy) has tended to be the purview of invested audiences, who collect unofficial recordings in order to supplement their 'official' purchases rather than to replace them (2004). So if bootlegs (unlike piracy) take away little from producers' sales, with invested audiences actually having 'helped create the star to the point where he is successful enough to create a demand for bootlegs' (ibid: 173), why should fans be excluded from experiencing something they love?

Theatrical bootlegging came under the spotlight again recently in relation to the hugely popular Broadway show *Hamilton*, another contemporary example of fan desires being stymied by the limitations of live performance. In response to a Tumblr request for a *Hamilton* video broadcast 'so that us poor people who can't afford to pay for a show can have the privilege of seeing it too', the show's creator Lin-Manuel Miranda replied that his team were planning to produce 'a really good recording' of the songs that year, and that while he was 'grateful and glad you want to hear it, [...] I want you to hear it RIGHT' (Gioia 2015: np). The question of producer fairness therefore extends beyond economics: Manuel's stated concern here was not the potential loss of revenue, but rather a worry about fans consuming 'a shitty, half-iphone recorded version' (ibid). While many people applauded Manuel's generously-worded intervention, another Tumblr user reblogged the exchange and added a thoughtful explanation of why this solution would be less than satisfying:

See no, you say this and then tickets for hamilton are ridiculously expensive and impossible to get your hands on, and by summer I may well be a completely different person! [...] I've watched one of the bootlegs on YouTube, with ridden with guilt, and there's a whole new depth to the show. Non stop isn't a song about being motivated anymore, its a song of alexander releasing time of the essence and the best of people die. The reprise of stay alive ends with Eliza's scream, it makes its quiet uptown darker. What about the whole show basically being a comedy? That's something I never realised until I watched that bootleg on YouTube. You know? King George in the Reynolds pamphlet? Burr in the election of eighteen hundred? I missed so much of the musical without ever knowing I was, as much as I am sorry I watched a bootleg I'm not sure if I can see much a negative moral loss as you. I've heard the musical exactly as it was intended for the whole world, then seen how it was shown to a select group of people.

(whywouldiwantyouonmyblog 2015: np)

Of course, fandom itself is no equitable paradise. Many fan scholars have explored the hierarchical practices of fan activity, with fan communities self-organising via complex

negotiations around status and expertise. However, in many ways those fan activities described above can be seen as a democratic form of community-making. This has been particularly bolstered by the rise of the internet. Albeit requiring a basic level of privilege (use of a computer, access to the internet, the ability to converse in an overwhelmingly Anglicised medium), it is now possible for more people than ever before to participate. Diane Penrod (2010) terms this online fan domain a ‘ludic democracy’: by encouraging playfulness and parody, the internet has offered new spaces and new opportunities for fans to come together and collectively reimagine favourite texts. In fact, Francesca Coppa has argued that fandom is itself a form of community theatre, which uses characters from fiction ‘to create a living theatre in the mind’ (2006: 243).

This sounds great in theory. And yet most film and TV fans who engage in practices such as fan-fiction writing and merchandise collectorship will have had the opportunity to engage with the texts themselves: in full, together, most often in the form and quality they were meant to be seen. This is not always the case, of course: at the most extreme end of the scale, there are examples of fan communities forming around texts they have not experienced themselves because *they never actually existed*. Fan researchers such as Lincoln Geraghty and Paul Booth have explored how fans develop attachments with paratextual television shows: ‘fictional texts constructed within a fictional universe’ (Sedgman 2017), which Paul Booth describes as ‘doubly fictional’ (2015: 54). My own research has extended this analysis into theatre, specifically exploring fans’ use of the TV show *Smash* to collectively imagine how its in-text musical, *Bombshell*, might work onstage. In doing so I have termed the phenomenon ‘no-object fandom’, inspired of course by Rebecca Williams’ (2015) pioneering research into post-object fans’ grieving practices when a beloved text ends.

This explanation may seem like a diversion, but I promise you it is not. This is because no-object fans and fans of an extant text *have something in common*. They are - at least to some extent - equal. No-object fans are able to share in their collective not-seeing, their acts of communal imagination, just as fans of a real-world text (a published book; a produced movie; an aired television show) can all take part in the act of reading, watching, experiencing. Conversely, as the discourse above demonstrates, theatre disaffords global audiences the chance to take part collectively in a formative event. Let us return for a minute to the *Hamilton* fan quoted above: there is an acute awareness here of the passing of time; the sense of being denied access to an important experience at a fundamental point

in life. As the TripAdvisor responses further describe, it is also true that the quality of the theatre experience tends to be hierarchised by ticket price, with the cheapest tickets having obstructed views or uncomfortable seating. Furthermore, while fans' *experiences* of filmic productions undoubtedly shift across time and through different modes of viewing, in theatre the text itself is notorious for being different every night. As with that infamous Bob Dylan concert, certain events might pass into theatre lore in a way that elevates the kudos of those who were there to witness it. See also Helen Freshwater (2012) on how *Billy Elliott the Musical* fans collect viewings of multiple Billys, performing status negotiations around the differences. Indeed, this sense of competition is precisely what I found when *Smash* ended and rumours began that *Bombshell* might actually make it to the stage, most prominently via a 2015 Actors Fund Kickstarter campaign for a live charity concert. Suddenly, audiences went from communally piecing together an imagined version of the musical, to jostling for tickets, to ultimately mourning their exclusion from the event. Suddenly, some viewers had been privileged over others (Sedgman 2017).

Theatre therefore imposes limits on the ludic democracy of fandom. Fans of a particular show may post synopses, memorise songs, read reviews, and grill those who actually attended for details - but how close can this actually come to the experience of being there and seeing it 'as it's meant to be'? Obviously audiences know that watching even a professionally-made recording - even live, even streamed to a cinema - is a different experience to attending the theatrical event itself.¹² However, digital documentation can perhaps offer fans a more equitable platform on which to practice their fandom. Furthermore, what studying the more 'specialist' fan spaces such as Tumblr and dedicated theatrical discussion forums demonstrates is the power for self-identified fans of having a space for assemblage: collectively gathering together images and interpretations from multiple vantage points and creating a form of theatrical experience in the process. The ever-expanding body of Tumblr comments compiled by theatrical fandom scholar Megan Vaughan (cursedchildtheatre.tumblr.com) is especially evocative in this regard, showing fans' gratitude to their fellows who have actually seen the show for posting (often highly detailed) recollections. On TheatreBoard.co.uk too there are both 'spoiler' and 'spoiler-free' threads, containing minutiae aspects of the show both secret and benign, and enabling fans to

¹² See e.g. Barker (2012) for research into how audiences manage the experience of watching performances livestreamed into cinemas.

manage their imaginative engagements accordingly. This positions *Cursed Child* as the latest in a long line of ‘secret discussion’ foci within the theatrical fan community, whereby fans in the know have tended to share information with those who *want* to know. The point of all this, of course, is that where live performance fandom *becomes* democratic, it is very often through the generosity and affective labour of other fans. Equally, while playful assemblages are all well and good, the extensive discussions cited here show how the absence of a foundational text can still risk producing fatal myopias, with major aspects being missed or misunderstood.

This brings us back again to Harry Potter. In a commendable effort to share the story with the wider fan community, on 31 July 2016 the script of the stage play was published. This was followed by a short lull, as thousands of readers around the world inhaled the text - followed by a veritable outcry of fan disappointment (Shepherd 2016). While 90% of TripAdvisor reviews gave the event the highest possible assessment, these were the ratings given by the three largest sources of reviews: Amazon.co.uk, Amazon.com, and Goodreads:

Fig. 2: Amazon and Goodreads review ratings for Cursed Child script

While Amazon reviewers were generally more positive than those who responded on Goodreads, on all three forums outbursts of pleasure were commonly tempered with less positive emotions: dejection, confusion, anger. As the following chart demonstrates, these people tended to have the most to say:

Fig. 3: Average Word Count by Review Rating on Amazon.co.uk

For some people this negativity was the result of a self-confessed mistake:

i purchased this book thinking it was an actual novel, it is not its the theatre version. Good reading but not quite the same, my mistake though. [Tink]

I was expecting a jk rowling book considering her name was on the cover but I got a theatre script dissatisfied to say the least. [Bugeag Sebastian]

But for the majority, it was the story itself that seemed problematic. Issues were raised variously with its narrative weaknesses, its subversions of magical logic, its evolution of beloved characters, and its fidelity to the books. A nice summary (with spoilers removed) of the overall tenor of these responses comes from Amazon reviewer APotterFan:

It's lazy and is riddled with more holes than a sieve. Time turners! Polyjuice potion! [...] Fidelius charm (or lack of)! [...] It's like they took what they thought were popular fandom tropes and wrote a story around them without bothering about whether they made sense or not or even conformed to previous canon. Maybe one or two small inconsistencies could've been explained away or even overlooked, but not this many.

Using an online tool (app.feedcheck.co/amazon-review-exporter) I scraped all 2,484 *Cursed Child* reviews from Amazon.co.uk into a CSV file.¹³ The qualitative analysis this enabled found firstly that 163 people directly compared the script to fan-fiction, and secondly that those who did this tended to rate the text much more negatively than average. Only 6% of these reviewers gave it a 5* rating compared to an average of 57% for that site:

Fig. 4: Ratings Given by People Who Compared the Script to Fan Fiction

Reviews containing these search terms included diatribes such as:

This should never have been written. It is an unnecessary tale that should be ashamed to be on the bookshelf alongside the seven-volumes of the Harry Potter saga. [Andi21]

it feels cheap, a bit soulless, tampers dangerously with well established characters & lacks a whole lot of excitement & mystery [Billy Nixon]

If you want my real emotion while reading this, how about this: A constant stream of cringe attacks. I didn't feel like I was reading the next 'story' and adventure in the Potter-verse but rather semi-decent fanfiction on AO3. The whole time. It made me cringe so much I had to put this book down until I forced myself to finish it' [Anonymous]

¹³ I could find no comparable tool to do this for Goodreads, and the 8526 reviews on Amazon.com proved too large a data corpus for the webscraper to handle.

At best, the experience offered many readers 'a quick nostalgia hit' [Mr. N. J. Jones], presenting the opportunity for a '[n]ice and nostalgic return to the world of Harry' [Jen]. At worst, this return had the power to fundamentally damage audiences' fond memories. For example, an anonymous reviewer said that as part of the generation that grew up wanting to go to Hogwarts, the script 'made me feel like I had got slightly too old for Harry Potter, which no other book has made me feel before'. Another reviewer, Charlotte G, describes the intensity of emotion that reading the script provoked: 'I have been a fan of J.K. Rowling all of my life (I'm only early 20s so grew up with Harry Potter) and I have never been so upset and disappointed. [...] Harry Potter should've been left well enough alone'. Several people commented that the script had been such a powerful knock to their fandom because it was announced as canon by Rowling herself:

It's okay, but it's not my Harry Potter. [...] My best advice is to accept this for what it is, and you'll enjoy it for what it is. I did, after all, want to keep turning the page. It's not a new Harry Potter book, it's a little frustrating at times due to the different authors, but Rowling after all is a bit of a genius so I imagine that is it fabulous in its intended format. I just wish it wasn't canon! [Anonymous]

I wanted to love it so much and it hurts that I can't say that. There were parts that I loved, but so many plot holes and out of character characters. Really disappointed. I wish JK never said this was canon.
[Tia]

Finally, in a 1654-word 1* review, Lucy presented an especially rich analysis of the contrast between the storyworld as it resides in memory and the experience of reading the script:

As a HP fan and book reader, this does not resemble the books in any authentic way and not simply because of the script format. The dialogue, plot and character portrayals in Cursed Child are totally 'off'. It felt like a poor imitation of the original series, which is appalling when JK Rowling was a co-creator of the story and presumably approved the draft(s) of this script throughout the writing process [...]. I cannot believe she allowed this thin, weak interpretation of her richly-constructed HP universe to come into the public domain. [...] JKR, please let HP be - it was perfect as it was and all this simply dilutes that perfection. Please don't ruin your amazing legacy. To any HP fans thinking of reading this book, please think carefully before doing so - it is entirely possible that it will irrevocably taint your memories of the book series as it pretty much stifles the magic we have known and loved. [...] I was lucky enough to get tickets to see the play in October but my main interest will now be the talent of the actors and the quality of the effects and production, which I'm sure will be outstanding. As for the

story itself, after seeing the play I am going to take the very immature stance that Cursed Child never happened. For me, HP ends with Book 7.

I have reproduced a sizeable chunk from Lucy's review because it exemplifies a primary finding from the research. This is the operation of a relational opposite, in which the 'rich' magic of the books is seen as diluted, stifled, and tainted by the 'thin', 'poor', 'weak' narrative of the script. For example, Sithe believed that the text 'actually undid the wonders' of the original', while Victoria might have been able to 'tolerate' the feeling of fan-fiction 'had the original characters actually felt like the complex, interesting characters they are instead of cardboard-cut-out versions in the play'. Jan Erlam argued that the 'story is so bland compared to the originals', and Omer B. Zion commented that 'it just falls flat'.

This in turn contrasts with the stage reviews, which overwhelmingly tended to emphasise the richness, the depth, and the sheer *magic* of watching Hogwarts come to life onstage. A number of reviewers have specifically dealt with the difficulty of bringing the script to life in the imagination:

I read this AFTER I saw the play. The play is 5 stars and beyond. The script is... not great. It is DIFFERENT to the play in so many ways [...] I was just so disappointed reading it cause it reminded me how good it could be. [...] Please don't judge this on just a read. It was never MEANT to be read. It's meant to be seen. [Elle]

In fact, just over half of all of the TripAdvisor Attraction reviews used a word like 'magical' or 'spellbinding' to describe the experience. These feelings tended to be augmented by ancillary factors such as the gothic beauty of the theatre and the warmth and enthusiasm of the ushers. However, for the most part praise tended to be heaped upon the stage effects:

Oh. Em. Gee. I was blown away by this truly magical production. It was easily the best theatre show I have ever seen. They were actually doing magic in front of my eyes! I felt like a child again looking on in awe. [Carolyn P]

You'll believe a man/woman can fly [and] transform before your eyes [Ken L]

The stage was beautiful and all the actors played their parts perfectly! It was so emotional and everything I ever dreamed of it being. There is magic infused throughout. [Jessicanight]

spellbinding! At one point I was so enthralled I completely forgot about the special effects and totally believed the magic. [deb w]

While for many people the script fell flat, as a live experience it was almost overwhelmingly deemed 'sensational', 'enchanted', 'fantastical'. Moreover, it is interesting to note the conflation of two different types of 'magic' in these reviews. The mechanisms of *stage illusion* worked to suspend audiences within a magical *experience*, with *Cursed Child* specifically mentioned in a BroadwayWorld.com thread on the best examples of stage magic, and TripAdvisor reviewer katkity even describing how the live theatrical experience had lessened the distance between their own Muggle life and the world of wizardry, making them feel 'closer to the magic the books made me feel than the movies ever managed'.

Conclusion

One of the primary limitations of online reception research is the difficulty of analysing how people's sense-making processes are informed by their subject positions. While its distance is also a key strength, allowing researchers to study how people phrase their responses in self-directed ways, this approach nonetheless limits us to 'gleaning insights from those tantalisingly rare things people choose to post about themselves' (Sedgman 2017). When applying this approach to the study of *Cursed Child*, it is clear that important questions were unable to be asked. These include: the extent to which both audiences and readers self-identify as fans, and how their investments may have inflected their experience; their comparative ratings of the original seven books, the films, and the new play; their views on the canonicity of *Cursed Child*; as well as demographic markers such as gender, location, and age.¹⁴ It is therefore practically impossible to draw out meaningful patterns on the connection between audiences' responses and the orientations they take up. This must therefore be read as a prolegomena for more detailed research that combines both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Nonetheless, as I hope to have demonstrated, there has been significant value in using *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* as the basis from which to explore the tensions between theatre and fandom. On the one hand, as a co-present medium theatre has the power to position audiences at the centre of a communal experience: to help fans become once again 'transported to Hogwarts', [trekkisue], to bring their beloved characters to life, and to 'immerse [them] in the magic' of Harry Potter [Lauren D]. On the other hand, only a very few fans have been able to take part in the event so far, and reading the script has (for many people) offered only a thin, weak slice of this spellbindingly rich experience. Furthermore, I suggest that the access restrictions presented by the theatrical format have proven to be particularly problematic in light of fans' enduring love: for these characters, their lives, and their storyworld. Because this was, after all, a long-awaited resurrection of one of the most widely-known stories ever written. After waiting for almost a decade it seems sad to think that, where a lucky handful have so far been able to board the Hogwarts Express, there are many millions more still waiting on Platform 9¾, forlornly left behind.

¹⁴ While some of this detail was captured in dommitor's survey (n = 520), their purely quantitative analysis offers no opportunity to understand how people explain their answers by drawing on senses of self-identity and fan community.

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